

Look Out! Look In.

Luke 10:25-37

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Church of the New Covenant

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A lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Who is this person? What is he asking?

The questioner is a lawyer. In particular, this person is an expert in the Jewish scriptures, called The Law, known to Jews as the Torah. He spends nearly every waking moment studying the scriptures. He is probably a person of prominence in his community, well-regarded not only for his vast and intimate knowledge of the Torah, but also for his prodigious ability to debate its finest points. When he stands up to pose a question, the people fall silent.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The challenge is laid down. Jesus is not cowed, however. In typical rabbinic fashion he replies to a question with a question – only this time with the same question. It’s as if one of the world’s great tennis players has smashed an unbelievable serve into Jesus’ court, and Jesus has blasted it right back at him.

The Torah expert doesn’t flinch. He replies with the most basic tenet of Jewish faith, the saying that every Jew is taught to recite when rising in the morning and when going to bed at night. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and he adds the corollary dictum, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

It is possible at this moment that the lawyer expects Jesus to counter with a different citation from the Torah and for the two of them to engage in an energetic dispute. But Jesus surprises him by conceding the game. And as he does so, he adds one more teaching point. “That’s all you have to do, then. Simply follow those precepts, and you will have the life that you seek.”

It's hard to tell from the text itself how the lawyer felt about that, but there is a hint that he may have been a little flustered. He needed to "justify himself".

"Well." He clears his throat, straightens to his full height, and looks down his nose in a scholarly fashion. "And ... so ... who, *exactly*, is my neighbor?"

To address this question, Jesus does another very rabbinical thing. He tells a story. It's a story that all of us have heard a hundred times, on which we have also heard many sermons (hopefully not a hundred!). I don't think you need me to tell you what the lesson is in the story of the Good Samaritan. What impresses me this time, however, is how Jesus uses the story to shift the perspective of the discussion.

When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" he seems to be trying to minimize his responsibility by asking not about what one is supposed to *do*, but *to whom* one is supposed to do it. The narrower the definition of "neighbor", the less responsibility the questioner might have.

As Jesus begins his story, he seems to be following this argument. Some poor fellow is robbed and beaten. He is obvious need of help. He is the "neighbor" in question. He is the object of the rule, "love your neighbor." As the story progresses, the priest comes upon the guy, crosses to the other side to put as much distance between himself and the victim as possible, and fails to "love" the neighbor. The Levite fails in the same manner. The poor neighbor languishes on the roadside.

After a time, a Samaritan comes along. He, of course, should also fail because everybody knows what terrible people Samaritans are. But Jesus surprises the listeners by telling them that the Samaritan stops and helps.

Everybody gets the point loud and clear. Jesus' story has effectively affirmed the lawyer's concept of an *other* person being the neighbor one is supposed to consider. Then, in the question he asks to summarize his lesson, he pulls off a subtle reversal. He does not say, "Who properly understood they *had* a neighbor?" He says, "Who *was* a neighbor to that person?"

Neighbor is not "Who is he or she?" Neighbor is "Who am I?"

An expert asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Or “What deed must I perform to qualify for the prize money?”

Even though he knows how to get an A on the Torah test, he has no idea of the meaning of the words he can so readily recite. Jesus wants him to set aside his arguments and take a deeper look into his beloved Torah. He wants him to understand that the verse he has quoted can be a window into an important understanding of what living really means.

We can think of a neighbor as someone we might see when we look out a window. If we live in the city and we see someone pass by on the street below, we can say, “She is my neighbor.” If we live in a suburban home we can look across our back yard and see children playing on their swing set, and we can say, “They are my neighbors.”

I think, while we are looking out our window, Jesus is asking us to notice something else. I believe Jesus wants us to notice the face reflected in the glass. As we consider the question “Who are they?” we must also ask, “Who am I?”

Both images must be kept in full view: the neighbor we see outside the glass and the person we see in the glass. The lawyer wanted to know something about some hypothetical other person. Jesus wants him to look inside himself. Jesus is raising an alert: “Look out!” he says. “Look in.”

The invitation in today’s gospel, therefore, is for us to examine ourselves according to what the lawyer rightly quoted from the law of faith, and gain some insight into life as God intends it to be lived.

We often talk about the love of God: about opening ourselves to receive the love of God, trusting in the love of God, listening for it. We also talk about showing forth the love of God, proclaiming the love of God, acting out the love of God. We talk most of the time about the way God’s love comes to us and works through us.

Today the Gospel is reminding us to do the reciprocal thing; to say Yes, God, I love you, too.

If we say “I love you” with all our mind, we are offering to God our intellect, our capacity to learn, our rational powers, our abilities to perceive and analyze, our inventiveness. Whatever it is we do as biologists, as teachers, as philosophers, as astronomers, as auto repair experts, as computer wizards, and especially as we bring our intelligence to ask tough questions about who God is and how God calls us to live, we are loving God with all our mind.

If we say “I love you” with all our strength, we are offering to God our personal power. When we hang on through the difficult passages of our lives – whether it be through a tough career transition, or a strenuous course of study; whether it be through a long illness – ours, or someone we care deeply about – whether it be years of advocacy for a cause, or a deep commitment to an important relationship, we can offer our fortitude, our tenacity, and our resilience – we can love God with all our strength.

If we say “I love you” with all our soul, we are offering to God our deepest essence, our innermost selves. If we are artists, the colors we apply to the canvas can be gifts of love. If we are poets, the words we use, the images we create, the rhythms and rhymes can be gifts of love. If we are musicians, the songs we sing, the harmonic tapestries we weave, the rolling low notes and the soaring high notes – even the ordinary middle notes can be gifts of love.

If we acknowledge those things that make us each so unique – the gift of being silly or thoughtful or intuitive or wise, of being energetic or hearty or blunt or gentle – all these can speak love to God.

If we spend time in quiet contemplation, wondering, listening, or simply waiting, we are loving God with all our soul.

What it all comes to is the heart, loving God with all our heart: loving God when courage is called for in an emergency or after a disaster; loving God with the compassion we feel when we spend time with someone who is suffering; loving God with the joy we feel playing with our grandchildren; loving God with our exuberance when playing a sport or laughing with friends; loving God with the pain we experience when we suffer a setback or a significant loss; loving God with the hope we have for this congregation and its ministry; loving God with the affection we feel for that someone to whom we are closest; loving God with whatever we do that engages the fire of our passion.

Today we are invited to declare, “I love you, God, with all my heart.”

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Just love. Eternal life is not a reward to be earned or won. It is a state of being. It is the fullness of life Jesus keeps telling people is close at hand. What must we do? We must simply love God.